

id: 240711
date: 12/18/2009 18:39
refid: 09HAVANA755
origin: US Interests Section Havana
classification: SECRET
destination:
header:
VZCZCXYZ0036
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUB #0755/01 3521839
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 181839Z DEC 09
FM USINT HAVANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5024
RUCOWCV/CCGDSEVEN MIAMI FL PRIORITY
INFO RHMFISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
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RULSJGA/COMDT COGARD WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCOWCA/COMLANTAREA COGARD PORTSMOUTH VA PRIORITY 0144
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEAHLA/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/FBI WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCOWCV/MARINCEN MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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S E C R E T HAVANA 000755

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/15/2029
TAGS: SNAR, PREL, SMIG, PGOV, CU, ASEC
SUBJECT: CUBAN BORDER GUARD'S FEATHERS RUFFLED BY USCG
RESCUE

Classified By: COM JONATHAN FARRAR FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D)

1. (C) Summary: The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) Drug Interdiction Specialist (DIS) assigned to the U.S. Interests Section (USINT) in Havana, Cuba attended a 10 December 2009 meeting with the Cuban Ministry of Interior's (MININT) International Relations Directorate (DRIC) and Border Guard (CBG). The subject of the meeting was a 3 December 2009 rescue by the USCG of 3 American citizens whose sailing vessel (S/V) inadvertently entered Cuban territorial seas

(TTS) and struck a reef, causing damage to the vessel, and creating an imminently dangerous situation for the crew onboard. The meeting also addressed the supposed incursion of a USCG aircraft into Cuban airspace during a routine patrol. During the meeting, Cuban officials alleged that the USCG had violated Cuban airspace. The meeting between the DIS and Cuba's MININT came at a time of heightened tension in and around Havana. The atmosphere was notably improved in a follow-up meeting with the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX) on 17 December. End Summary.

2. (C/NF) On 10 December 2009, the USCG DIS assigned to USINT, attended a meeting with the Cuban MININT at a protocol house in Havana. In attendance were the 2 MININT Directorate of International Relations (DRIC) "handlers" who coordinate the DIS's meetings with the Cuban Border Guard (CBG) and National Anti-Drug Directorate (DNA) personnel. The total number of MININT officers in attendance was 5: 1 Colonel (COL) and 4 Lieutenant Colonels (LTCOL). 4 officers, including the COL, sat directly across the table from the DIS while one of the handlers sat immediately next to the DIS, as usual, and read his written notes. All 5 officers were wearing uniforms and ribbons as they normally do when they want to appear more imposing and drive home their points.

3. (S/NF) COL Samper (COL), who directs CBG's operations nation-wide, and is the DIS's primary conduit into the CBG when not speaking directly with CBG watchstanders, was the primary speaker during this meeting. He was accompanied by a female LTCOL who has taken on more of an active role in CBG interactions with the DIS in the past 6 months. The other LTCOL, who the DIS believes directs the MININT's international relations division (he rarely attends meetings, but is normally visible when DIS is around/working with MININT elements), played the role of the second heavy-handed speaker who delivered the follow-up to COL Samper's comments.

4. (S/NF) COL Samper's 20-minute commentary elaborated on the Diplomatic Note received in both Washington, DC and Havana earlier this week, protesting the USCG's "gross violation" of Cuban territorial seas (TTS) and airspace, on 3 and 4 December respectively. Focusing primarily on the COLUMBINE incident, he gave a chronological run-down of the DIS's communications with the CBG command center. He repeatedly referred to the entry as "inexcusable, inadmissible, a violation without authorization," and repeated much of the same language contained in the Diplomatic Note. The COL angrily asserted that throughout the duration of the incident, a CBG vessel was standing by to assist the mariners onboard the COLUMBINE, the mariners spoke Spanish and were able to communicate with the CBG crew. The latter, he alleged, made numerous offers of assistance, and told the COLUMBINE crew that a rescue & salvage vessel was enroute to assist. The Colonel asserted that the COLUMBINE was never in any imminent danger, and he expressed disbelief that the crewmember was suffering from chest pain.

5. (S/NF) While the COL's entire commentary was heated and extremely pointed, he became visibly and verbally more emotional when he brought up the issue of the time the USCG took to recover cargo from the S/V and the water after the USCG had already pulled the 3 mariners onboard 2 USCG rescue vessels. DIS estimates that this act led the GOC/MININT/CBG to question whether or not USCG crews were trying to cover

something up throughout the rescue phase of the case.

6. (S/NF) Following COL Samper's comments, the LTCOL (presumably the head of MININT's DRIC) began to calmly explain that he was not going to repeat the COL's comments, but did want to underscore additional points. He likened the supposed USCG HC-130 incursion on 4 December 2009 to the "incident on February 24th, 1996," (referencing the Brothers to the Rescue shoot-down case). Turning his attention to the COLUMBINE incident, he reiterated that the entry of both USCG "auxiliary vessels" was a gross violation of Cuban sovereignty, and challenged the USG to look at this issue "as if the tables were turned." If Cuban assets had entered U.S. TTS, he forcefully stressed, the USG would be equally upset and angry. He then asked why the USCG decided to violate Cuban TTS when we (CBG) and the USCG (specifically USCG District Seven in Miami) have worked similar cases in the past, in which the Cubans have provided quick and capable assistance.

7. (S/NF) The LTCOL's commentary became more and more adversarial as he continued to speak, but he stuck to the "command message" that both he and the COL relayed at various points during the meeting: "The United States Government owes the Government of Cuba an explanation as to why it took the actions it did, and what measures we plan to prevent this kind of violation from occurring again."

8. (S/NF) In tag-team fashion, towards the end of the meeting, the COL and LTCOL asked for clarification on the role of the USCG DIS in Cuba, and questioned whether the DIS has the necessary influence with his bosses at USCG District Seven to mitigate these kinds of incidents. Both MININT officers seemed to be saying that as the USCG's designated liaison to Havana, the DIS should be able to prevent these kinds of "violations" by informing his headquarters in Miami.

9. (S/NF) DIS informed the group of officers that he was not going to make any comments. Instead, he assured them he would take all of the information that they passed and forward it to USINT and District Seven, as well as ensure that our response Diplomatic Note address the issues they raised. Moreover, the DIS assured everyone in attendance that there was no contraband in the bags recovered from the S/V, and they were only the crew's personal belongings.

10. (S/NF) The meeting closed when the COL showed the DIS a list of the items recovered from the S/V COLUMBINE, making

sure to point out the length of the list (100 items) that included radar and radios. He was adamant that each item was dry and in good condition when it was recovered. He then showed the DIS 3 photos of COLUMBINE, "the day after the incident," in good condition, with a Cuban salvage operator climbing its mast. In the photos, the vessel is listing approximately 20-30 degrees, and looks to be high and dry out of the water (assuming low-tide). One of the color photos depicted the name of the vessel (of note was the COL's comment that "none of these photos has been doctored by Cuban officials"). When the DIS asked the COL if his office could send the DIS copies of the photos via email, he stated "we have the photos and all the other information, but we're not sending anything." That concluded the meeting.

11. (S/NF) Observations: 10 December is International Human Rights Day. There was undoubtedly a lot of tension in Havana as there were numerous crackdowns on peaceful human rights marchers as well as on one British Diplomat who was passively observing the protests as part of his work portfolio. Besides MININT's follow-up to the go-fast "hijacking" case prior to the Migration Talks in July 2009, this was the most heated meeting the DIS has had since his arrival in-country. Both officers were doing their best to make a point, angrily, but the DIS gauges that both were genuinely upset.

12. (S/NF) Comment: While the relationship that exists between the USCG and Cuba's MININT, specifically the CBG and DNA, is generally viewed as one of the more fruitful and positive USG-GOC interactions, this relationship is by no means immune to the periodic bursts of anger at the U.S. by the GOC. Separately, Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX) representative, Armando Bencomo, took a softer line and opined that the case demonstrates that both the U.S. and Cuba could stand to improve the flow of information between both sides. The DIS gauges confidently that MINREX, via MININT, is attempting to elicit a response from the USG in order to maximize its interaction with USINT and the USG writ large. The DIS accompanied the Chief of Mission to a meeting at MINREX on 17 December to present the USG response to the GOC Diplomatic Note on this issue. The tone of that meeting was much more calm as the MINREX side appeared to take well the news that the USCG was reviewing the incident and information would be forthcoming.

FARRAR

=====CABLE ENDS=====